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# THE STRATEGY OF DECEPTION

## *in the Vietnam War*

The Westmoreland trial produced startling new evidence of exactly how the men running the war duped the public about the strength of the enemy.

BY DAVID ZUCCHINO

**O**NE DAY IN early March of 1967, Gen. Earle Wheeler read a secret cable from U.S. Army intelligence in Vietnam that both disturbed and displeased him. The cable indicated an increase in enemy attacks in South Vietnam. Wheeler, as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, regularly reported on the war effort to President Lyndon Johnson and his top advisers, but this bit of news would not be passed along.

Instead, Wheeler fired off two top-secret cables to Saigon warning that the new numbers were "dynamite" that would "literally blow the lid off of Washington" if they became known. In a cable dated March 9, Wheeler ordered Gen. William C. Westmoreland, the commander of U.S. forces in South Vietnam, to "do whatever is necessary to insure these figures are not — repeat not — released to news media or otherwise exposed to public knowledge." In a follow-up cable to Westmoreland two days later, Wheeler made it clear that he did not doubt the accuracy or validity of the new numbers. The problem was that they simply were not sufficiently optimistic.

"I cannot go to the President," Wheeler complained to Westmoreland, "and tell him that, contrary to my reports and those of the other chiefs as to progress of the war — in which we have laid great stress upon the

thesis [that] you have seized the initiative from the enemy — the situation is such that we are not sure who has the initiative in South Vietnam."

Wheeler, at least, had successfully seized the initiative in an expanding public relations war. The numbers were kept under wraps, and another threat to the official, upbeat version of the war's progress was headed off.

That the men running the Vietnam War regularly distorted information and massaged facts has long been known; only recently has the plotting and management of the deception been laid out in such rich detail. The details are contained in top-secret cables and reports that were declassified and made available in the recent Westmoreland/CBS libel trial; Westmoreland had sued the network after a 1982 television program accused him of having conspired to understate the enemy's strength during the war (he dropped the suit before it went to the jury).

Many of the documents were never introduced as evidence, because they had no bearing on the libel trial, but when these "eyes-only" and "top-secret" reports are compiled as a seamless record of private communications in 1967 and 1968, they reveal in the words of the war's managers themselves how much time and energy were invested in selling the war as winnable in the face of contradictory evidence.

DAVID ZUCCHINO is an *Inquirer* staff writer who covered the Westmoreland/CBS libel trial in New York.

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